

The More the Obstacles Fall Between Us: An Interactive, Multi-Media Performance to Develop Empathy and Prompt Action

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ABSTRACT

The Welcome Project at Valparaiso University began as a response to demographic shifts on campus and to the tension and conflict that attend the increasing diversity of a previously homogenous culture. Since its inception, we have believed that collecting the stories of those experiencing that tension help us better navigate the conflict. Research in neuroscience, intergroup dialogue, and interactive theater demonstrates the power of empathy and disequilibrium to move people from identification or dis-identification to potential action. In this chapter, we use that research to frame how an interactive, multi-media performance engages participants in empathy and disequilibrium by presenting excerpts from Welcome Project facilitated conversations and audio stories. In watching actors take on a range of reactions to the stories and to each other, participants can test out their own responses against these to make decisions about how best to act in their communities. First performed at the Porter County Museum in Valparaiso, Indiana, the performance has been adapted for conference and classroom settings. Future research includes developing a pre- and post-survey to assess the way our project's various practices impact participant interest in diversity and willingness to work for inclusion.

THE MORE THE OBSTACLES FALL BETWEEN US: AN INTERACTIVE, MULTI-MEDIA PERFORMANCE TO DEVELOP EMPATHY AND PROMPT ACTION

Many of us work hard at building a culture of equity and inclusion; many of us also work hard at listening, at paying attention to the stories people tell about themselves and their communities in order to do this work. Marshall Ganz (2013), social activist and senior lecturer in public policy at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, writes, “Narrative is how we learn to make choices, how we learn to access the moral resources (hope, empathy, self worth) to respond mindfully and courageously to urgent challenges” (n. pag.). For Ganz (2011), telling stories communicates moral lessons: “Stories teach us how to act in the ‘right’ way. They are not simply examples and illustrations. When stories are well told, we experience the point, and we feel hope. It is that experience, not the words as such, that can move us to action, because sometimes that is the point—we have to act” (p. 282). He suggests, therefore, an intimate link between story and action, between naming culture and changing it. We at the Welcome Project at Valparaiso University <<http://welcomeproject.valpo.edu>> believe that facilitating civic reflection around first-person stories strengthens that link and can help move people into action.

How does facilitated conversation rooted in first-person stories give potential to new ways of acting and living together? Although disparate fields of study, research on empathy, intergroup dialogue, and interactive theatre offer compelling responses.

Neuroimaging research over the past two decades offers a growing body of evidence that humans are able to reenact the actions and intentions of other people, including experiencing emotions, through mirror neurons, or “empathy neurons” (Gallese et al. 2004; Iacoboni et al. 2009). While only one component of empathy, mirror neurons seem to allow us to identify the self in the other. Gallese (2005) writes, “The sharp distinction, classically drawn between the first- and third-person experience of actions, emotions, and sensations, appears to be much more blurred...” (p. 43). Pavlovich and Krahne (2012) weave together research from neuroscience with organizational research and quantum theory to argue that empathy allows shared experience through dissolving of barriers between self and other, transcending self-interest and individual ego, and moving toward universal coherence.

Such coherence is of great value to organizations and communities that are becoming increasingly heterogeneous. We are in need of practices that call upon our empathy and aid us in maintaining engagement with each other and our community at large even as we change and become more diverse. Gurin et al. (2002) describe students' experience of 'disequilibrium'—being stretched by unfamiliar and sometimes uncomfortable ideas—while simultaneously developing active thinking and democratic beliefs. Higher education institutions “should provide a supportive environment in which disequilibrium and experimentation can occur by increasing interaction among diverse peers and help faculty and students manage conflict when individuals share different points of view” (pp. 362-363). In the end, by traversing the unfamiliar and the uncomfortable, we are better able to see the potential coherence at the root of our different experiences.

Stories offer us a portal. “When we tell a story, we enable the listener to enter its time and place with us, see what we see, hear what we hear, feel what we feel” (Ganz, 2011, p. 284). If stories enable us to empathize, facilitated conversation like that of intergroup dialogue provides further engagement with the story and ways in which we hear and process the stories differently from each other.

Intergroup dialogue practices typically involve bringing together participants from two or more social identity groups with approximately equal representation from each group to have face-to-face, sustained, facilitated conversation on issues of potential conflict. Dessel and Rogge (2008) offer an extensive empirical literature review of intergroup dialogue research: “Primary theories that explain how intergroup dialogue ameliorates conflict center on concepts of social identity, attitudes, social constructionism, self-reflection and perspective taking, anxiety reduction, learning, friendship potential, power balance, and cooperation” (p. 212). While such findings give reason to be optimistic, the formula for intergroup dialogue may be too manufactured; life is not so demographically proportionate. So while we may be able to construct well-balanced spaces or programs, much of campus and community life defies such proportional representation, especially when we take into account intersectionality and the way it complicates our responses to conflict. In addition, many intergroup dialogue practices are under-assessed in part due to the need for intensive, mixed method assessment strategies and analyses; nevertheless, the existing research on intergroup dialogue shows promising evidence of conflict resolution, improved relationship, and reducing prejudice.

Theater, another medium for sharing stories, can also benefit from the outcomes of intergroup dialogue if we look at the impact of methods derived from Boal's "Theatre of the Oppressed," wherein the fourth wall is broken and interactive techniques are used to directly engage the audience. Kumagai et al. (2007) assessed an interactive theater workshop aimed to train faculty to facilitate small-group discussions about multicultural issues in order to foster critical consciousness in medical education. Kumagai et al. found an increase in awareness of classroom experiences of minorities and women, with faculty reporting changes in facilitation behavior due to the workshop. Interactive theater and intergroup dialogue both, then, not only cultivate empathy through stories and conversations, but also actively engage participants in the process and encourage action and behavioral change.

In order to live well together, we need practices that use storytelling and dialogue to activate our empathy, encourage active listening and perspective taking, and motivate action and/or changed behavior. Ganz (2009) writes, "After developing our stories of self, then we work on building relationships, which forms the story of us. From there we turn to strategizing and action, working together to achieve a common purpose, learning to experience hope—that's the story of now" (n. pag.). Individual stories alone won't promote good community; we need to discover collective stories as well.

For the last six years, the Welcome Project has been working in Valparaiso, Indiana, and more recently, in both Lake and Porter counties, collecting stories of how and when people experience belonging—or not. In that time, we have interviewed over 250 people, posted more than 180 edited stories to our website and worked with over 175 students and 80 faculty and staff. We have actively used and taught others how to use these stories in facilitated conversations to discuss what it takes to live well together amidst increasing diversity and difference. Since 2009, we have reached over 3,700 people through facilitated conversations on campus, in the city, and nationally at conferences or workshops. Typically, we do this using a facilitation model adapted from the Center on Civic Reflection <<http://civicreflection.org>>, which fosters the practice of reflective discussion through the use of readings, images, and video, in order to help people consider the beliefs and values that underlie their commitments. Currently, we are working with Associate Professor of Psychology Jennifer Winkvist, a colleague at Valparaiso University, and her undergraduate research students to develop a pre- and post-survey to assess the way our project's various practices increase interest in diversity and inclusion. Future research, then, will incorporate findings from these surveys to better test our claims about empathy and how it encourages behavioral change and prompts action.

More recently, we wanted to engage participants in storytelling and dialogue through performance to see how disequilibrium might be collectively experienced and held within the shape of a script that weaves together responses we've received from facilitated conversations and stories across our archive. The ultimate aim was to introduce participants to the central questions animating the Welcome Project in a way that encouraged them to make those questions their own, both individually and civically. In doing so, we hoped to prompt an appreciation for the complexity of living well together in increasingly diverse communities and to inspire inclusive behaviors that participants would enact in their own attempts to "live well together."

To meet these goals, we created "The More the Obstacles Fall Between Us," an interactive, multi-media performance in four acts (reproduced in its entirety as an appendix to this article). Initially performed as part of a Welcome Project exhibition at the Porter County Museum in Valparaiso, Indiana, the play was then adapted for conference and classroom settings. Each act focuses on a central question that is subsequently illustrated through the spoken word play of four actors and excerpted audio stories from the Welcome Project's archive. These questions move participants through a structure (its own kind of narrative) that we adopted from the Center on Civic Reflection: clarification, interpretation, and implication. Act I, therefore, asks participants to clarify what diversity stands for. Act II asks them to interpret what makes living together in diverse communities challenging. Act III asks them to consider which resources we can bring to the work of creating more inclusive communities. And Act IV asks them to consider what the performance implies for their own life with the simple and direct question, "What can I do?"

Because each act explores its question both through excerpts from Welcome Project audio stories and the actors' interactions with those stories and each other, empathy and disequilibrium are experienced on two levels throughout the performance. First, participants have their own opportunity to identify or dis-identify with the Welcome Project storytellers. In drawing from the archive, we selected stories from a variety of positions (traditional to progressive, conservative to liberal, inexperienced to experienced) and a variety of social categories (race, religion, socio-economic status, etc.) to ensure that participants would encounter beliefs and/or experiences different from their own. In Act I, for example, the storyteller in "Marketing Tactics" critiques institutions and organizations for inauthentically laying claim to diversity in order to promote a "politically correct" brand in which they don't invest real resources. Another storyteller in "I Get Food from the Food Bank" portrays the pain that can come with diversity when one aspect of your identity places you at odds with the dominant culture; comfort is then found when the storyteller finds people "like her" in an unexpected space. The final Act I storyteller in "On My Own Terms" asks participants to stop seeking common ground at the expense of our differences. He suggests that we should begin instead with the premise that we are "fundamentally different" with an "unbelievable amount in common." The performance doesn't make clear that one storyteller is

correct at the expense of others, or even that the storytellers need to be seen as at odds; however, the stories themselves indicate that there is no single narrative that allows us to define diversity, that we must rather listen to a chorus of voices. In this way, participants practice empathy and disequilibrium in ways similar to participants encountering the stories on their own or in a more typical facilitated conversation—they inhabit the stories and take note of their own identifications and dis-identifications.

But theater allows us to offer a second, collective practice in empathy and disequilibrium as participants watch the actors react to the stories and take on different stances that sometimes place the actors in conflict with one another. For example, in Act I, actor “Two” often puts forward a multicultural view while “Three” puts forward a colorblind view and “Four” a critical race theory view. In other words, the actor’s reactions demonstrate that an individual’s own set of experiences and interpretive lenses may place them in conflict with a storyteller and/or the community. This leads to debates in Act I (which actor “One” often tries to negotiate) about the legitimacy of labels, the distinction between labels and names, the value of belonging and the need for recognition. Participants, by sitting one step removed from someone else’s identification or dis-identification, can evaluate the outcomes of those reactions without implicating themselves directly. This provides room for discernment and reflection, the kind of “supportive environment” discussed by Gurin et al. (2002) that develops active thinking and democratic beliefs and that allows participants to “manage conflict when individuals share different points of view” (p. 363). It is also the kind of supportive environment humans require to make decisions about changing our behaviors or taking action.

The title of the show, “The More the Obstacles Fall Between Us,” is taken from the final Welcome Project story included in the performance. As part of our practice, we have always used the words of the storytellers themselves to name the stories we edit from their interviews before placing them on our website. We do this to acknowledge the risk storytellers take in speaking from their experience and to honor the way in which they desire to frame that experience. When possible, we also use the names of Welcome Project stories to title our conference presentations, exhibitions, and articles. Our work is collaborative at its heart, and we seek to recognize that whenever possible. Though this practice doesn’t necessarily indicate we agree with that storyteller’s particular point of view, it does indicate our faith in what Pavlovich and Krahne (2002) suggest is a “universal coherence” that exists outside or perhaps underlies the experience of the individual ego. By choosing one storyteller’s formulation to capture or stand in for the whole variety of experience we are attempting to share, we assert that our differences do not have to be ultimate barriers to our shared desire to remain engaged with each other and our community at large. Perhaps obstacles will persist, but the more they fall between us, the more practice we receive in engaging our conflicts and moving, if not to a place of complete accord, at least to Ganz’s (2009) “story of us” right now.

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THE MORE THE OBSTACLES FALL BETWEEN US

A Welcome Project performance

We dedicate this script to our friends and colleagues Jane Bello-Brunson, Alan Bloom, and Gus Sponberg-fighters for justice, each one.

Cast of Characters

ONE

TWO

THREE

FOUR

ACT I

ACTORS NEED PROGRAMS.

Audio recorder should be within reach but out of way for Scene IV. One actor should be in charge of audio/video. Test speaker level before performance. ONE, TWO, THREE and FOUR are stationed around the room, so audience gets “surround sound” experience. THREE and FOUR should be “in front.”

ONE

Write down a word or phrase that comes to mind when you hear the term,

TWO, THREE, FOUR

Diversity.

ONE

Different, Different, Unique Difference, Different, Different...

ONE AND TWO

Different

TWO

...opinions, ability to learn about each other, Everyone is different

THREE

Different Individuality/Different Cultures

FOUR

Different, Different types of people, Different Races, People from...

FOUR AND ONE

Different backgrounds

ONE

...that can be joined together, People from different lifestyles, culture and geography.

TWO

Culture, Cultured, Cultures, Enriched Culture.

Culture, Culture, Culture, Culture, Culture.

THREE

Multi-cultures, Multi-Ethnic, Multiple Ethnicities, Race, Ethnicity, Ethnicity, race.

Lots of races.

FOUR

Change.

ONE

People are People, Wonderful People, Community, Family, home...

TWO

New York City, Milwaukee.

THREE

Different, Different, differences, all sorts of different people, different than me...

THREE AND FOUR

Differences differences Different

FOUR

Many groups of different people, different cultures, religions and ethnicities, Differences of ideals.

ONE

Different but the same.

TWO

Frame of reference, Broaden Perspective, International School, Global Economy, flags, Olympics, unify, Compare/contrast.

THREE

Variety, Variety, Uniqueness, Variety, variety, variety, variety, oversimplification...

THREE AND FOUR

variety

FOUR

...of Cultures, Variety; a wide variety of people who come from a different cultural background, as well as people with different sexual presentations.

ONE

Mix, variety, Wide variety, a wide range of options, New normals.

TWO

Equality, A Learning Experience, not my high school, Minority, Title 9, College, College.

THREE

Unique, homogeneous uniqueness, Interesting, Acceptance, Independence–

ONE, TWO, THREE, AND FOUR

Be yourself, everyone else is already taken–

THREE

Synergy, Character Builder, Potatoes...

FOUR

Potatoes?

THREE

(shrugging)

Potatoes.

FOUR

Mixture, a mix of people from different cultures and experiences in a group.

ONE

Mixture, Mixed ideas, perceptions, melting pot.

TWO

Cultures, culture, Culture, Cultures.

THREE

More opportunities, experience different things.

FOUR

Racist,

ONE

Religion, All have fallen short of the glory of God and all are redeemed by his Son

TWO

That's...

THREE

...Different, Different way of thinking,

FOUR

Common Difference, Differences, Different people interacting...

FOUR AND ONE

Different cultures...

ONE

places,

TWO

backgrounds.

THREE

Differences

FOUR

Difference

ONE

Different

TWO

different

THREE

An old wooden ship

FOUR pauses to look at THREE in wonder. THREE makes gesture like, "What do you expect me to do about it--I'm just reading my lines!"

FOUR

(begrudgingly starting again)

our differences

ONE

differences

TWO

Differences

THREE

different

ONE, TWO, THREE, AND FOUR

Cool different people!

THREE

(aside)

A sampling of responses from randomly selected incoming college students.

FOUR

Whew!

ONE

(turning to an audience member—casual, friendly)

So what comes to mind when you hear the term, diversity?

(Give that person a chance to answer.)

TWO

(turning to someone else)

What about you?

THREE

(turning to someone else)

And you?

FOUR

Uh, can we all just do this? Then we can add our word or phrase to the exhibit.

THREE and FOUR take the lead: Actors open their programs and write their word or phrase on the post-it or index card that's been provided. Stick it to a designated space on a wall or board. HELP AUDIENCE MEMBERS WHO LOOK LOST.

As audience finishes sticking the notes, actors take the "stage" to indicate moving on. Chairs in semi-circle at this point.

WHEN AUDIO PLAYS LISTEN AND SHOW INTEREST WHERE WE FEEL IT. Try not to forget that audience may be watching us.

PLAY MARKETING TACTICS: <http://welcomeproject.valpo.edu/2012/10/18/marketing-tactics/>

AUDIO-MARKETING TACTICS:

I guess I just have a problem with the whole diversity campaign in general...I do...I think it's a little strange when you're selecting people and you're like 'Hey, we need you to hold this sign. And the sign is going to say "Mexican." So, if you come to our school, we're going to give you this sign and ask you to stand over there. And hey, you, you look black, stand over there. And hey, you, you look gay, stand over there.'" And then you get all of these people together and there's like a white majority that just stands around them in a semicircle while they just hold their signs. And it's just complete segregation. And then...so let's have activities where we all get together and then you tell us about your sign. And then it's like 'Oh, here, cover up your sign,' and then you don't really get to even see their face because their sign is so damn big and so in your face that it's just like there's just a sign that's being held up by somebody behind it.

And then... I don't feel like it does anything. And I think it just forces people to be like 'Ahh! There's diversity out there! Did you know that?' It's like, 'Yes, I did. Thank you. But I don't know this person, I don't know anything about them other than the ethnicity of their background that might not really have anything to do with their person at all.'

That's the kind of thing that I really do feel like, it's looking for 'the right kind of diversity.' We're looking for faces to fill these spots on our campaign ads. And if you're saying things like "the right kind of diversity," I don't think you have a pure desire to just diversify campus, but you're looking for marketing tactics.

TWO

Whoa, that's a little cynical.

FOUR

Wow. You understood her? Way too fast for me...

THREE

I think I get it. It's about labeling people, right? And how labels force us to see a category rather than a person.

ONE

And how some people aren't given a label. They're put in the role of spectators instead.

TWO, THREE, FOUR

...a white majority that just stands around...

FOUR

What does it mean to be white anyway?

African-American, Asian-American, Native American, Latin American, Muslim American, white American...?
That doesn't add up. If some people have to use hyphens, we should all have to use them.

THREE

No way. I just want to be American. Let's drop the hyphen altogether!

TWO

But I like my culture. I want to celebrate it, acknowledge it, show others I'm proud of it.

ONE

And sometimes, when I'm the only one like me, I miss my culture, and I need to find familiar faces.

PLAY AUDIO: <http://welcomeproject.valpo.edu/2013/03/08/i-get-food-from-the-food-pantry/>

AUDIO—I GET FOOD FROM THE FOOD BANK:

If you ride the V-line, not just the places that go from campus exactly, but just around the city, you'll see, kind of, people that you didn't realize were living in the city. I heard some guy talking on the phone and asking somebody if they needed their laundry done cause he had 20 bucks left, and he was going to buy tobacco, but if the other guy needed his laundry done, he was only going to buy a little thing of tobacco instead of a big thing so that they could both do their laundry. And I was like, you know, that was the kind of thing I grew up with, and it kinda felt that's nice to hear in Valpo, you know? Not that it's good that people don't have enough money, but like, to know that there's people like that around.

You know, the bus that I was riding was the one that went by Housing Opportunities so there would be a lot of people when we would drive by. And on Tuesday mornings, people would be waiting in line because that's when they would do their food pantry thing. And it's like hey, I get food from the food bank at home, you know, my grandpa brings it by once a month or so. So that was kind of the moment where I realized wow, I feel like I belong around these people sometimes, you know? And my roommate felt that was really weird when I told her. She was like, "So...you liked being on the bus...with all the people...who don't have money?" And I was like yeah, you know, they wear kinda crappy clothes, and I don't feel like I have to look good when I get on the bus. And it's kinda cool.

THREE

Um, I'm kinda with the roommate on this one. What's cool about riding the bus? I've always hated it.

FOUR

That's not exactly what the roommate said.

ONE AND TWO

"So... you liked being on the bus... with all the people... who don't have money?"

THREE

Yeah. That's what I said: what's so cool about riding the bus?

FOUR

It's not about the bus; it's about the people.

ONE

Yeah, you're missing the point. She likes riding the bus because she gets to be around people that remind her of herself and her family. She doesn't feel like she stands out for a change.

TWO

But doesn't that lead to the problem we're talking about? If we all hang out with people like us, up go those signs with their labels.

FOUR

Well, you're assuming we only identify with one kind of group.

THREE

But more identities just means more labels...

ONE

What if we make a distinction between labels and names? I mean, labels are pasted on you, but names we use to introduce ourselves.

TWO

I get it. Like labels put you in a category, but names make you an individual.

THREE

C'mon. Try Googling John Smith...

TWO

Alright...

(pulls out phone and pretends to do search)

1,010,000,000 results. Oh, wait... if I just put those quotes around his name...

(back to searching)

we narrow it down to... only 3,460,000!

ONE

Okay, okay. Point taken. Names can be shared like labels can be shared. But I do think there's an important difference. If a white man walks into a room of African-American men named John Smith and calls out, "Hey, boy," no one in that room is going to feel like an individual. They're going to feel diminished and reduced, seen as less than. But if that same white man walks into the room and calls out, "Hey, John," then the black men will turn around to see who's asking for them. Each person in that room is going to feel recognized.

THREE

Alright, but the term African-American or working class--those aren't names. They're labels.

FOUR

Only sometimes.

THREE

Um, what?

FOUR

I mean, this is what makes the whole thing really complicated. It depends on who's using the term and in which context, right? If I'm a lesbian hanging out with my friends, and we start talking about the queer community, I feel recognized. Queer's a name I can be proud of--with a history to reclaim. But if I'm walking down the street with my girlfriend, and someone yells, "Queer," from their car window, then I've just been labeled and the name is suddenly alienating.

TWO

Okay, now my head is starting to hurt...

PLAY EXCERPT OF AUDIO:

<http://welcomeproject.valpo.edu/2013/07/22/on-my-own-terms/>

AUDIO EXCERPT—ON MY OWN TERMS:

The system of multiculturalism Valparaiso has embraced, it garners attitudes that we're all fundamentally the same and our differences are trivial. And I disagree with that wholeheartedly. We're fundamentally different, and we have an unbelievable amount in common. I know it seems like a play on words there, but, really, it affects your attitude in how you see and how you embrace things.

TWO

Difference.

ONE

When I step outside my comfort zone...

TWO

I feel uncomfortable and defensive.

FOUR

I feel curious.

THREE

I'm feeling bored. C'mon, haven't we been over this ground before? (receives a look from FOUR)

TWO

Commonality.

ONE

Living in community.

TWO

Wanting to belong.

THREE

Wanting to feel safe.

FOUR

Wanting to grow and change.

ONE

What does it take to live well together...

TWO

...when you have different backgrounds?

THREE

...when your expectations don't line up?

FOUR

...when circumstances impact you differently?

Scene II

ONE and THREE should take two center seats; pull them forward a bit and situate them side by side. It's as if you will be speaking from video clip. Your "characters" will not interact. When you are not "on," sit very still, eyes down on your scripts, so you'll know when to come "up."

TWO and FOUR take places elsewhere in the room.

PLAY AUDIO (OR VIDEO) EXCERPT:

<http://welcomeproject.valpo.edu/2014/01/21/a-turbulent-time/>

AUDIO (OR VIDEO) EXCERPT--A TURBULENT TIME:

You know, '67... it's hard to understand it as a kid when you're 10; you really don't understand what's going on in the world, but it was a very turbulent time. And it seemed there was a lot of pent up angst and the civil rights movement was in its nascent stages and beginning to take traction. And Gary was sort of the epicenter of that because it elected the first African-American mayor, I think, of any major city, certainly one of the very first. And he was very young, and I can only imagine that a lot of expectations were thrust upon him to make a statement. And he did. What followed was really a lot of concern about if Gary would continue on the way it has, and unfortunately there was a "white flight" that began in '67. And many people who had the ability moved because it became very quickly a fairly dangerous place.

ONE

I grew up in the Miller Beach neighborhood of Gary. I was the only white kid in my elementary school. It was not a big deal to be different. Much later, when I visited Butler University and was having a great conversation with one of the student guides there, he asked where everybody was from, and I said, "Gary, Indiana," and he said, "Unhh," and turned away. When I came here to Valpo, I didn't experience that. (from People Get Scared)

Audio--A Turbulent Time:

It's easy to pinpoint the reasons for the fall of Gary on a race or a person. The fact of the matter is there were many factors, and it was the perfect storm, and it was 1967. I mean, it was the perfect storm. But I'm sure it created fear for people saying, Hey, we got a good thing going here and we don't want it to go the way of Gary, and, unfortunately, they were not thinking that through, and trying to define it in terms of color.

THREE

My first day at VU was a huge shock. Like it wasn't culture shock because I was the only black person--I had been at events like that. But just the comments people made like, you know, when I said, "Oh, I'm from Gary," and the first comment someone made was, "Oh, have you ever been shot?" Then someone had the nerve to ask me if I had children. It just was like, "Really??...okay..." Made me wonder what I had gotten myself into. (from You've Never Lived in Those Shoes)

CONTINUE AUDIO (OR VIDEO) EXCERPT:

AUDIO (OR VIDEO) EXCERPT—A TURBULENT TIME:

So that is clearly an undercurrent in the area and it has been for many years. And I think it's dissipating, particularly as another generation takes over. And as more generations... I think, you know, it is dissipating. Do we have people who do stupid things, you know, in terms of... yes, we do. And, frankly, I'm not so sure we can stop the few people from doing stupid things and making people feel unwelcome. What I think we need to do is focus on the vast majority of others and encourage them to maybe go a little bit out of there way every time they have an interaction.

THREE

People so many times try to discount what I learned in Gary and just the education I received because when you look at statistics, our schools aren't doing as well as other schools. But the fact that I'm able to do well here I feel like should prove against that. But it's pretty constant--I have to prove to you that I'm worth your time and worth me being here. It's just the looks that people give you and even in classes. I feel like people constantly ask, Do you get it? Like just because of my color, and it might be me being sensitive about it, but sometimes I feel like people don't realize that I'm just as capable as everyone else just because I come from Gary and because I'm black. (from *You've Never Lived in Those Shoes*)

ONE

I have no idea how to change that because it's been going on for a very, very, very long time--that people in a place feel they are privileged to it and they have ownership over it and they are more comfortable if everyone looks like them and thinks like them and speaks the same language they do. And when you have a group of different people come in--and the bigger the group, the worse the effect--people get scared and they want to protect themselves and they assume it's their right to protect themselves and their culture and their tradition. It feels like a very human nature thing, and I think it's wrong, and I don't know how we'd best go about changing it except in the very subtle way of inviting people to widen their perception. (from *People Get Scared*)

TWO

(walking onto stage)

All of us, in the course of telling our stories, try to make sense of our experience.

FOUR

(walking onto stage)

These reflections can become starting points for important conversations.

TWO

(addressing audience)

What did you think about the idea that we can't stop a few people from doing stupid and unwelcoming things, so we should focus on encouraging others to go out of their way every time they have an interaction?

Go ahead and take a few minutes to talk with your neighbor.

ONE and THREE be prepared to go join someone for the conversation; otherwise, dialogue with each other.

TWO and FOUR will observe and watch the time.

FOUR

(interrupt the conversations, then when you have silence...)

Okay, let's do one more. This one's a bit complicated. I want you to imagine you've been living in a place for a good while; you've contributed to the well being of that place; you feel like you fit in. (pause briefly) A new and different group of people move in; things will need to change to make room for their needs and ways of doing things. How do you feel? Do you wish you could feel differently? If so, how?

Go ahead and take a few minutes to talk with your neighbor again.

TWO and FOUR be prepared to go join someone for the conversation; otherwise, dialogue with each other.

ONE and THREE will observe and watch the time.

ONE

(interrupt the conversations, then when you have silence...)

We hope we're interrupting some rich conversations.

THREE

We hope that everyone will continue to think about these things and talk with each other after the performance.

TWO AND FOUR

Difference...

ONE

Division.

TWO AND FOUR

Difference...

THREE

Opportunity.

Scene III

All “actors” take the stage, sitting in a kind of semi-circle. ONE should be next to THREE, close enough for the “nudge.” MAKE SURE EACH HAS A PROGRAM AND A WRITING UTENSIL. Once settled...

PLAY AUDIO:

<http://welcomeproject.valpo.edu/2013/08/17/enamored-with-these-beautiful-young-faces/>

AUDIO–ENAMORED WITH THESE BEAUTIFUL, YOUNG FACES:

So my husband and I, we’ve adopted two girls who were born in China. When we were going through the application process early on for our first adoption, I spent many, many hours looking at what are called referral photos. And a referral photo is the photo that an adoptive family receives when they have been matched with a specific child abroad. So at least in the China program, the way it works is, you don’t know who you are going to be adopting ahead of time. At some point late in the process, the Chinese agency matches a specific child with your specific family and you receive the photo. And so when you receive the photo it’s, it’s a big event.

To help pass the time and as a way of encouraging myself, I would go online, and I would look at referral photos that other families had posted. And I was fascinated with these photographs. Curious about where they were from, learning the different regions of China, and was just enamored with these beautiful, young faces.

So eventually we receive our referral photo and six weeks later we go and we meet our daughter for the first time and come home and finalize the adoption process.

So fast forward maybe five years, I was watching a film--it's a story of a married couple, the wife ends up working in an orphanage--and I recall so clearly watching a particular scene in this movie where there's a very slow pan over this room of children in this orphanage. It would linger on individual faces, and as I was watching this scene, I remember thinking, 'Oh, look at her fine features, she really reminds me of Raina,' and, 'Wow, look, that girl, she kinda has wavy hair, and that's like Sophia's, and, boy, you don't really expect that. Oh, that person has a toothy grin just like Maylin does.' And I realized I was visually processing this group as a group of individuals. They jumped out at me as individual faces. And I was just startled because I thought to myself if this had been an orphanage in India, I could almost guarantee that I would have not visually processed this scene in the same way because I don't have a bank of hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of images of the vast variety of faces like I do for China.

I really think it was looking at all of those photos for all of those months that helped me finally see this group as just a bunch of individuals together. And it took a lot. It took a lot to get there. I didn't even know it was happening. It was completely unconscious.

It just, I think, takes a lot for our hearts and our minds and our eyes to get there, where we start viewing groups that look different from us not as groups, but as individuals.

THREE

(to ONE, TWO, and FOUR)

Alright, don't hate me, because that was a cool story, but all I can think about now is the tag line: "all black people look alike" or "all white people look alike..."

FOUR

Well, that does make sense. I mean, she is talking about that kind of experience, and how when you have a "bank of faces," suddenly that experience changes.

ONE

(to other actors)

What about you all? Is there a group of people that all “look alike” because you don’t have a “bank of faces?”

TWO

Whoa. That feels risky. Maybe we just write down our answers?

THREE

Agreed. I’m not sure I even feel comfortable sharing my answer.

ONE

Okay. Let’s write our answers in our programs but just for ourselves.

Each actor opens their program, obviously enough for the audience to understand that they should join in. Pause briefly while everyone writes.

THREE pulls out phone and appears to be texting.

TWO

Hey, are you texting?

ONE

OMG, we’ve got company. (indicating audience)

THREE

Relax. I’m just looking up the word enamored. Listen to this.

(reads)

“To fill or enflame with love; to charm or captivate.”

FOUR

Wow, what would it take for each of us to become enamored with those we usually see as so different?
(hold up slip of program to indicate connection)

ONE

(beat--give people a chance to look at their paper)

Is that a fair question? I mean the storyteller wasn't trying. She even said it was unconscious.

FOUR

Maybe. But she also made the decision at some point to adopt from China.

TWO

But kids... everyone loves kids.

THREE

(a kind of aside)

Uh, I don't know about that...

ONE nudges THREE, a kind of "knock it off" gesture. Then ONE turns to FOUR.

ONE

So are you asking: how do we let people win us over, especially those we perceive as different than ourselves?

FOUR

Something like that.

THREE

But she was internally motivated. You can't ask people to manufacture that kind of investment.

TWO

But shouldn't it already be there? This is our community we're talking about. We should all be invested in our community.

THREE

Community. Community. Are you sure there's only one? I mean, we keep saying how people are attracted to others like them, how much we enjoy feeling comfortable. Maybe we don't have a community; maybe we have several communities.

ONE

White Non-Hispanic, African-American, Asian-American/Pacific Islander, Hispanic/Latino, Native American, Multiracial, International, Other.

TWO AND FOUR

Please choose all that apply.

ONE

Rural, Suburban, Urban.

FOUR

Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin, California, New Hampshire, Texas, Oregon, Chicago...

THREE

–that's not a state!–

TWO

–to some people it is–

FOUR

...Arizona, New York, Nebraska, Kentucky, Nevada, Aurora

THREE

–oh, come on...–

TWO

–hey, if we’re letting Chicago slide...–

FOUR

Idaho, Rockford...

TWO looks at THREE with a “don’t go there” look.

FOUR

...USA, Guam, Ohio, Arkansas, Minnesota, Colorado, Alaska, D.C., Puerto Rico, Tennessee, Elkhart...

TWO

(looking at THREE)

–you are definitely letting Hoosiers claim a city, too!–

FOUR

...New Jersey, Valpo...

THREE

–my hometown!–

FOUR

...South Korea, Portland, Missouri, Hammond...

THREE makes the gesture of “my lips are sealed” to TWO.

FOUR

...Indonesia, India, and Pennsylvania.

ONE

Male, Female.

FOUR

Gay, Les...

TWO

(interrupting)

Hey, wait. Back up.

(leaning over to ONE)

You didn't say transgender or gender nonconforming.

ONE

Well, no one marked that on their survey.

TWO

Still... sometimes people don't feel safe identifying themselves even on anonymous surveys. I mean, their peers are right there. Some might worry about people looking over their shoulders.

ONE

Fine, fine.

Male, Female, Transgender, Gender Nonconforming.

FOUR

Can I go now? (TWO nods.) Gay, Lesbian, Bi, Straight, Queer, Questioning, Asexual—and (looking at TWO) even though we didn't put them on the survey—Intersex, Pansexual.

TWO

Alright, alright. So we have lots of ways to identify and therefore lots of communities we belong to. But, jeez, we still all have to live together.

THREE

Easier said than done.

ONE

And maybe not so easily said either. We've really wrestled with the challenges of language. Like "Welcome Project."

TWO

To welcome someone implies a host and a guest.

THREE

That's great for a dinner party, but for a community?

FOUR

Yeah, when "we" who have been here and feel like we belong try to make "you" feel comfortable, it ends up being this us/them thing instead of "ours."

THREE

Yeah, we don't think about how are we going to be stretched and changed–

TWO

or how the community is going to be stretched and changed

THREE

–we only think about how do they need to change to fit in.

ONE

So, what would it take to think, "Okay, the community is ours, not just mine? What would it take to be curious and excited about change?"

Scene IV

ONE and THREE leave the stage. TWO and FOUR turn their chairs facing each other into an interview setting.

FOUR sets up the mike on remaining chair and puts on headphones.

FOUR

So don't worry about the mike. Once our conversation gets going, you'll forget it's even there.

Okay, I always like to start with having people tell me a little about where they're from.

TWO

Yeah, sure. I grew up in Jeddah, a large city in the western province of Saudi Arabia. It's very diverse with many cultures, immigrants coming who have kept their roots. This makes Jeddah unique.

FOUR

And your family?

TWO

I come from a small family, two younger brothers. My mother's family is from Jeddah, but my father's family is from Mecca, so I didn't have the chance really to meet my cousins.

Actually, I am kind of diverse because my grandmother is Egyptian, and I have cousins from a Turkish mother. (from *I Don't Believe in Borders*)

FOUR

But you identify as Saudi?

TWO

Actually, I do not believe in nationalities. Saudi Arabia is only 83 years old. It was once just part of Arabia. And Arabia is more than a nationality, it's a race. Everyone who speaks Arabic, everyone who lived in an Arabic country, can be called Arabian, so, actually, I don't believe in borders.

FOUR

Well, have you ever felt people trying to put borders up?

TWO

Oh, sure.

FOUR

Tell me about a time when that happened.

TWO

So it was hard for me when I went to Utah, when I first arrived to United States. Their culture I'd never encountered with, cause they have a different religion, different social life. I was walking down the street and there were missionaries chasing me, talking about religion. It was the first time I've been exposed to missionaries. I didn't even know what missionary mean. So she kept talking about Mormonism and Jesus Christ, God, and she asked me questions about my beliefs and my origins. When I said I'm from Saudi Arabia, I'm Muslim, she said, "You gonna kill us all."

FOUR

Whoa. What happened? What'd you do?

TWO

I just kept walking, but since then I had fear to encounter with people, especially from Mormon society. And I isolated myself, I did not talk much to people; I was hanging out with people from my background.

But I want to say that people in Utah are used to their religious habits. I understand how difficult for them to see someone acting differently in their society. They have been living together for decades, and it's kind of difficult to see an outsider walking in their society, changing the way they think or the way they believe. Cause these beliefs and thoughts shapes your identity, shapes your perspectives, and changing these thoughts would change you as a person, so it would take long time to accept outside thoughts and beliefs.

FOUR

That seems incredibly generous of you. I don't know that I'd be able to empathize like that.

TWO

Well, the more I learn about other people, the more the obstacles fall between us. We all belong to Adam and Eve; we all started as one. I think that human beings can live with each other in peace if they believe they came from one seed and their destiny is the same.

As I said, I don't believe in borders, cause if you went up to the sky and looked down, you won't see these black lines.

ONE and THREE should join TWO and FOUR who should now turn to face the audience. Everyone stands.

ONE

What happens when we look at the name of the group we wrote down earlier and consider,

ONE, TWO, and FOUR should all look in their programs as THREE delivers next line.

THREE

"we all started as one;" my destiny is the same as yours?

Brief pause for contemplation.

TWO

I feel a sense of possibility.

FOUR

(needs to be read by white actor)

I suddenly see how celebrating diversity could include me.

ONE

I have a hard time wrapping my mind around it. Adam and Eve trip me up. I mean, what if I'm gay? What if I'm Buddhist?

THREE

I can't help but hear cheesy '80s music.

ONE starts singing "Nothing's Going to Stop Us Now." THREE joins in.

TWO and FOUR cross their arms and stare down ONE and THREE.

ONE AND THREE

Sorry...

FOUR

(to THREE)

Try again?

THREE

Okay, okay. When I think...

(talking to self, looking at slip of paper)

"we all started as one; my destiny is the same as yours..."

Looking up from slip of paper, shrugging--just can't do it.

TWO

(coming to the rescue)

...it makes me feel like I can risk trusting people cause we're all in this together.

ONE

Even though we're still

TWO

Different

THREE

Multi-ethnic

FOUR

Varied

ONE, TWO, THREE, AND FOUR

Cultures.

ONE

Because if we went up to the sky...

TWO

and looked down,

THREE AND FOUR

we wouldn't see these black and white lines.

ONE

But we're not up there; we're down here.

THREE

So what's our job now?

TWO

What can we do from down here?

FOUR

What can I do?